

Methodology

The analysis in Diane Hessian's columns are based on research activities conducted with a 500-person online panel, comprised of American voters. The primary purpose of the panel is to engage with voters on an ongoing basis about their views of the country, the presidency, our politics, and the future. Although the size of the respondent base is sufficient for quantitative analysis, the primary objective of the project is qualitative – to understand the “why” behind more quantitative methodologies like surveys and polls. In this particular situation, the design of the panel and its methodology had special considerations. First, candor was a critical factor: people are so used to being polled that many admit to not telling the truth to pollsters. And, given the divisiveness in our country, many voters are accustomed to avoiding controversy and keeping their opinions to themselves. Although it is not possible to guarantee that people would tell everything, we wanted to significantly increase the chances that this would happen.

Panelists were recruited via a variety of methods, including social media (recruiting from Facebook groups), in-person recruiting at political events, and purchases from firms that sell address-based sampling. In addition, an incremental group of millennials was added in the summer of 2017 via work with The Blue Lab at the Liberty Square Group, a political consulting firm. The panel is refreshed on a continuous basis, mostly to replace non-participants or to add segments of particular interest; for instance, in the summer of 2017, we added 50 additional millennials in order to do special work with this segment of the population. Or, we added additional voters from Alabama in the midst of the Senate campaign with Roy Moore and Doug Jones.

As of January 31, 2019, Panelists include:

Democrats: 39%

Republicans: 41%

Independents: 10%

Trump Voters (2016): 45%

Clinton Voters (2016): 42%

Non-voters (2016): 4%

Voted for other than Trump or Clinton (2016): 9%

Panelists represent all 50 States, with most states having 10 participants. Exceptions to this include:

Alabama: 11

Alaska: 7

Hawaii: 6

Kansas: 9

Massachusetts: 13

Michigan: 14

Mississippi: 6

North Carolina: 12

New Hampshire: 12

North Dakota: 7

Pennsylvania: 13

Texas: 14

Wyoming: 6

Men: 231

Women: 279

White: 405

African-American or Caribbean-American: 40

Hispanic: 41

Other: 16

College graduates +:229

18-29: 104

30-49: 143

50-64: 130

65+:123

The decisions about numbers in each category above were made based on many considerations. However, the primary driver was to get a critical mass of voters (focus group size) in each state, and to generally reflect the other demographics of voters in the U.S.

To qualify for the panel, each prospective member received a detailed description of the work, including guidelines ensuring that their privacy and confidentiality would be protected. In this document, Hessian revealed that she had worked on an unpaid project for the Clinton campaign and that she is self-funding the research; moreover, she noted that no organization was paying her for her data – to ensure for respondents that their opinions were not being “sold to the other side”. If panelists wanted to continue, the next step was a 45-minute telephone interview with Hessian, with the goal of verifying detailed demographic information (age, gender, occupation, location, voter registration, past presidential votes from 2008, 2012 and 2016, and more.) The second goal of the interview was to increase trust – so that participants would know that an actual person – who would not judge them, only listen – was on the other end of their comments. The third goal of the phone interviews was to make a determination about where along the political spectrum a respondent should be placed: liberal, moderate, or conservative. Moderates were tagged based on their views of where we are as a country, and their reactions to certain questions about policy and values including views on immigration, the media, healthcare, and gun control. All participants needed to have access to the internet. Approximately 90% of those interviewed qualified for the panel; those eliminated included non-U.S. citizens, and people who decided not to take the time.

Once on the panel, participants are given weekly projects, via email. These projects vary intentionally, to make participation fun and interesting, given the longitudinal nature of the work. Typical projects might be a True/False quiz, a video for people to view and respond to, a fill-in-the-blanks exercise (like Mad Libs), an open-ended question, or even a request that they ask questions of friends, or watch a speech and send reactions. Additional techniques have included image annotation, voter journeys, mobile ethnography, and heat mapping. In rare circumstances, participants are given a more quantitative survey, but surveys are typically used to begin a conversation on a

particular topic; for instance, people might be asked about whether they support Obamacare, but the meat of the response is in why they responded the way they did.

Other than bias that occasionally arises from sampling, the primary bias in this panel is that most of the respondents are more engaged politically than the average US citizen. Thus, for instance, they are much more likely to read a newspaper daily – or to be aware of world events -- than a typical voter.

The responses are content coded and sorted, using spreadsheets and technology that was originally created at C Space for the purposes of coding qualitative content. Themes are ranked on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being “only said by 1-2 people” and 5 being “a major recurring theme.” Quotes chosen for Boston Globe articles are typically rated a 4 or 5. From time to time, if Hessian is unclear about a particular comment or response, she will follow up with a phone call to the respondent.

None of the respondents are paid for their time – and on average, a respondent will take 5-10 minutes each week to do the work of the panel. Response rates are almost always greater than 50% and often significantly higher. The highest response rates come from Fill-in-the-blanks/Mad Libs exercises.

The techniques used by Hessian were derived during her tenure as founder and CEO of Communispace Corporation, now C Space, which was acquired by Omnicom in 2011. Communispace was the first company to use online communities for market research, which is now an accepted and proven method of leveraging the internet for insight. In online communities, respondents are also able to have conversations with each other. In online panels, called communipanel, the respondents are only in conversation with the researcher. Hessian chose panels because of the emotional nature of the topic, and the risk of voter conversations turning unproductive. She covers all of the expenses for the research personally.

More information about online communities and the methodology can be found at <https://cspace.com/customerinside/>